

Exploring new monastic communities: the (re)invention of tradition, by Stefania Palmisano,
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Stefania Palmisano's *Exploring new monastic communities: the (re)invention of tradition* is a timely and worthwhile contribution to an area of study – monasticism – that has received little contemporary theoretical, and in particular sociological, attention. The focus of Palmisano's attention is not though on traditional monasteries but on monastic communities that have been defined as 'new'. Drawing on empirical research of eight new monastic communities (hereafter NMCs), Palmisano sheds much theoretical light on their emergence, analysing in particular the ways in which these communities both share resemblance with, and differ from, their traditional counterparts, as well as the reception they have received at the institutional levels of the Catholic Church.

Emerging in the wake of Vatican Council II, the defining features identified by Palmisano of these NMCs, understood as a conceptual category, are: an emphasis on the most innovative aspects of Vatican II's theology; and the fact that they do not belong to a pre-established order (though they may draw inspiration from them). These distinguishing elements are manifested in a set of distinctive characteristics, including: mixed communities of both monks and nuns; the acceptance of lay members; the rejection of enclosure; and involvement in ecumenical dialogue.

Palmisano is less interested in documenting the details of the everyday life of these communities as exploring a set of questions based around these sets of distinctions, and the points of continuity and discontinuity that they represent with traditional monastic life. As such, the book is orientated around Palmisano's primary thesis that NMCs are (re)inventing the monastic tradition, in that they represent 'a radical re-elaboration of a historically-existent tradition' (4). This thesis is elaborated upon in the first chapter of this volume, which offers a conceptual model for studying NMCs. The process of (re)invention is understood to involve 'a selective, innovative reconstruction of monastic memory by mobilising new, culturally crucial values [...] which cannot be entirely assimilated into the traditional framework of monasticism' (23). This conceptualisation offers a nuanced and helpful insight into the complex dynamics of change and continuity that these NMCs embody, and avoids the dichotomy that has been established between tradition and innovation by much social science, as Palmisano identifies.

The book then turns to examine the case studies upon which Palmisano's theoretical insights are based, Chapter 2 introducing eight NMCs within the Piedmont region of Italy. This, and the subsequent chapters of the book, draws upon interviews with community leaders and members of these NMCs, as well as interviews with the leaders of traditional monastic communities and bishops, in order to gain insight into the reaction these NMCs provoke among more traditional sectors of Catholicism and the Catholic authorities. Chapter 2 provides information about, and a description of, all 8 of the Piedmontese NMCs, which are highly varied in terms of their membership, size and religious tradition, while Chapter 3 turns to look specifically at the community of Bose, a large, well-

known and 'successful' NMC that represents a fascinating case study. With characteristic acknowledgement of complexity, Palmisano draws careful attention to the fact that Bose's economic success, and its large membership, may be conceived more negatively if such factors are seen to erode the authenticity of the community or remove it too far from its origins.

Chapter 4 develops in greater detail Palmisano's primary thesis, that of the (re)invention of traditional monasticism that NMCs offer. In dialogue with, and in challenge to, Hobsbawm's notions of invented traditions, Palmisano offers the notion of *inventive* tradition in order to capture tradition's generative nature, thus highlighting 'the creativity with which they [NMCs] generate – on the basis of tradition – new symbolism and new socio-cultural imagery designed to realise monasticism in contemporary society, making it relevant for today's men and women' (98). Palmisano considers the ways in which historical traditions are subject to three main processes that comprise the (re)invention of tradition: innovation, reinterpretation and rejection. Palmisano also highlights how many of these processes are influenced by certain cultural tenets of modernity, such as subjectivisation, increased sensitivity to issues surrounding gender, and the sanctity of choice. This relationship between monasticism and modernity is one of the most interesting dynamics explored by Palmisano and, if anything, there was room for further development of some of these themes.

The final chapter of this volume is dedicated to the relationships of the NMCs to episcopal authorities, and considers the complex, and changeable, processes by which NMCs may or may not receive recognition and legitimation. This chapter thus situates the development of NMCs, and their future prospects, within the context of the Catholic Church and its authorities. Palmisano acknowledges, however, that not all NMCs are motivated by the desire to achieve institutional recognition and legitimation, and that, whilst higher levels of external recognition offer greater amounts of protection for a community, there are also risks, such as NMCs being placed under greater external control and constraint.

Over the course of this volume, Palmisano provides compelling, nuanced answers to her proposed research questions. Her approach is theoretically robust, while also grounded in rigorous empirical research, and her line of analysis and argument is perceptive and complex, allowing for the emergence of various tensions. Palmisano's understanding of, and insight into, a complicated institutional religious landscape is also impressive, though, for a non-specialist reader, the lack of basic background information into, for example, the significance of Vatican II may represent something of a stumbling block. As Palmisano's conclusion acknowledges, there are also still a number of possible avenues for future research in this field. This volume demonstrates particularly strong analysis of the relationship between NMCs and the Catholic tradition, but one fruitful direction for future research might be to further consider the dynamics of the relationship between monasticism and modernity.

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